

Learner-Centered Grammar Instruction

By Abdulmoneim M. Mohammed

In classroom language learning situations, the teaching of grammar may provide a short cut to learning the forms and structures which the limited language input itself may not cover. Drawing the learners' attention to the linguistic patterns and providing them with the underlying rules and principles can enhance the learning process since learners usually try to discover rules from the language data by themselves. In other words, the teaching of grammar can support the learner's natural rule-discovery procedure. The superordinate strategy of learning is often referred to as hypothesis formation and testing. This entails observation of language data and arriving at tentative rules that need to be confirmed or modified. Grammar instruction, then, can add to, confirm, or modify the hypothetical rules which the learners formulate by themselves.

An important difference between many currently used pedagogical grammars and the learner's rule discovery procedure is that the former contain relatively elaborate analysis together with grammar terminology. The learner's hypothesis formation process does not operate on the basis of metalanguage carried over from reference grammars. It involves observation of language data, and formation and verification of hypotheses without metalinguistic contamination. One main objection to using metalinguistic terms is that it has nothing to do with the way in which people actually process language. Another drawback is that the learner has to learn those terms in addition to the language. Still another problem in using metalanguage is that the learners may focus on those terms and learn them by heart either because they believe those terms are what the teacher or textbook writer wants them to know or because they believe that language learning is a matter of learning the metalinguistic terms.

The most important implication that can be drawn from this is that grammar rules and explanations can be presented in such a way as to approximate the learner's hypothesis-formation process as far as possible. Teaching that is based on the learning process seems to be more effective than that based on grammarians' descriptions of language. Pedagogical grammars can be made less formal by avoiding the grammarian's jargon or, at least, keeping it to the minimum and by avoiding elaborate and complicated analyses. The more metalinguistic terms and concepts are avoided, the smaller the gap may be between teaching and learning strategies. The problem with most pedagogical grammars is that metalinguistic terms increase in number, length, and complexity as the learners move from one stage of learning to another, and from one lesson to another within one stage. The learners' progress from one stage or lesson to another does not presuppose that they can understand or make use of metalinguistic grammatical explanations. The case appears to be that learners learn language as one thing and metalanguage as another. They acquire the language from the data they are exposed to and learn metalinguistic explanations as facts. Thus, grammar becomes a "fact-based" rather than "skill-based" subject. These two types of knowledge are reflected by the fact that a learner may have analytical knowledge about a language without being able to communicate in it.

A technique that I found useful in teaching grammar is to use *This word*, *This part*, rather than a technical term while pointing at or underlining a word, a part of a word, or a part of a sentence in

question. The basic source of information for such an *informal* pedagogical grammar was the learners' own reflections on their hypothesis formation process, their explanations of how they arrive at a given form or structure. I also benefited from introspection studies and from explanations of errors. I used this technique in a remedial lesson to minimize the redundant object pronoun in relative clauses written by Arabic speaking learners of English, (e.g. *Most of the places which we visited them.*The Person I told you about him).

A pilot experiment was carried out in nine Sudanese secondary schools with 714 third year student participants. The students in each school were pre-tested, matched, paired, and randomly divided into two equal groups. One group was taught the relative clause in its traditional form. The other group was presented with terminology-free contrastive comparisons between Arabic and English; only the terms pronoun, subject, and object were used. The two groups in each school were taught by the same teacher. The same pre-test (translation of a paragraph containing 14 active object relative clauses) was given as a post-test. The number of correct active object relative clauses (AORCs) were counted for each student in both groups. The number of AORCs correctly produced by the experimental group was higher than that of the normal group in all schools, and the difference between the means of the two groups was statistically significant. The tentative results of this study indicate that a grammar teaching technique that attempts to approximate the learners' strategies can be more effective than the traditional technique based on metalanguage and elaborate analysis. Currently used pedagogical grammars can be made less formal since learners seem to engage in terminology-free contrastive comparisons when they formulate rules about the language.

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